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A Critical Analysis of the Mystery Revealed to Paul

Frank Van Dyke

Paul calls the gospel (or a special part of it) the mystery that was made known to him.¹ A certain Dispensational theory says that this was a new gospel revealed to Paul; that Paul's gospel was different from that preached by the twelve apostles; that a new dispensation (called the mystery dispensation) began with Paul.

There are two forms of Dispensationalism. The more popular form (the Darby-Scofield type) is commonly known as Premillennialism. The more extreme form (Bullingerism), in addition to holding the premillennial view, claims that an entirely new gospel was revealed to Paul, and that water baptism is no part of it for any purpose. The regular form (Premillennialism) has been given considerable attention; but this more extreme form of Dispensationalism needs more thorough investigation than it has heretofore received.

I. Nature and History of Dispensationalism

Dispensationalism defined. The word *dispensation* is translated from the Greek word *oikonomia*, which means "the management, oversight, administration, of others' property; the office of a manager or overseer, stewardship."² The idea of a period of time does not inhere in this word; however, E. W. Bullinger, a staunch Dispensationalist, correctly states:

The Greek word rendered Dispensation is *oiknomia*, and refers to the act of administering. By the figure *Metonymy*, the act of administering is transferred to the time during which that administering is carried on.³

C. I. Scofield, the man who popularized Dispensationalism in America, gave this definition: "A dispensation is a period of time during which man is tested in respect to obedience to some *specific* revelation of the will of God."⁴

Strictly speaking, anybody who understands the distinction between the Law of Moses and the Gospel of Christ may be called a dispensationalist. But the word Dispensationalism, as it is used today to designate a certain system of teaching, means much more than this. It includes the special idea that the Church Age is not only distinct from the Jewish Age, but that it is a dispensation that was never foretold in prophecy.

History of Dispensationalism. Dispensationalism, as a historical movement, can be traced back to the Plymouth Brethren in England

¹Ephesians 3:1-7.

²Joseph Henry Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, p. 440.

³Ethelbert W. Bullinger, *How to Enjoy the Bible*, p. 79.

⁴Cyrus Ingersol Scofield (ed.), *The Scofield Reference Bible*, p. 5.

and Ireland, early in the nineteenth century. John Nelson Darby, originator and leader of this group, traveled extensively in the United States and Canada. Two men in America who became fervent advocates of Darby's teaching were James H. Brookes, of St. Louis, and James Inglis, of New York.

W. E. Blackstone and C. I. Scofield popularized Dispensationalism in America. Arno C. Gaebelein, a close friend of Scofield and a member of the committee that produced the *Scofield Reference Bible*, gives us the information that Scofield was closely associated with, and received the principles of Dispensational interpretation from, James H. Brookes.⁵

The Darby-Scofield type of Dispensationalism may be summarized as follows: (1) The prophecies of the Old Testament foretold an earthly kingdom for Israel; (2) Christ came to set up this earthly kingdom; (3) if the Jews had accepted Christ, the kingdom would have been established; but when they rejected him, the fulfillment of prophecy was interrupted, and the Church was established; (4) the Church will be raptured to glory before the Great Tribulation, and then following the Great Tribulation Christ will establish an earthly kingdom and reign as an earthly king for one thousand years; (5) though there were some transitional changes during the Acts period, the Church began at Pentecost, and the Twelve preached the mystery gospel of grace.

Ultra Dispensationalism. E. W. Bullinger, in England (1837-1913), went beyond Darbyism and taught that the present Church Age did not start until after the close of Acts, and that water baptism is no part of the gospel for this age. His teaching is denounced by many other Dispensationalists as "Ultra Dispensationalism."

Some present day Dispensationalists, such as J. C. O'Hair, of Chicago, and C. R. Stam and Charles F. Baker, of Milwaukee, disagree with both Darbyism and Bullingerism on the beginning of the Church. They claim that the Church started after Pentecost but before the close of Acts; but they do not agree on an exact time for its beginning. John B. Graber, a Dispensationalist of the Darby-Scofield kind, classes the teaching of these men as Ultra Dispensationalism, but he calls it the "moderate type" and Bullinger's views, the "extreme type."⁶

Both the "moderate type" and the "extreme type" of Ultra Dispensationalists insist that the present dispensation of grace began with Paul, not Pentecost, and that water baptism is not to be practiced today.

II. The Mystery Revealed to Paul

What is the mystery? The word *mystery* (*musterion*) means, ac-

⁵Arno C. Gaebelein, "The Story of the Scofield Reference Bible," *Moody Monthly*, XLIII (November, 1942), 128, 129.

⁶John B. Graber, "Ultra-dispensationalism" (unpublished Doctor's dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1949), p. 43.

cording to Thayer, "*hidden purpose or counsel; secret will.*"⁷ It is something once hidden and then revealed. Paul defines it as the great truth that "Gentiles should be fellow heirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel."⁸

Dispensational claims about its beginning. Dispensationalists insist strongly that the prophetic message of the Old Testament had no reference to the present Church age. Cornelius R. Stam states that the prophetic message "deals *directly* with Israel and the nations, not with the body of Christ."⁹

Furthermore, it is claimed that the Twelve never did preach the mystery gospel, the gospel of the grace of God. Stam says that "it was through Paul, and no one before Paul, that Christ was *set forth to be a propitiation* THROUGH FAITH IN HIS BLOOD (Rom. 3: 25)."¹⁰

Ephesians 3:1-12. This is one of the main passages of Scripture used in support of this Dispensational teaching. The main points used are listed below.

1. A dispensation or stewardship (*oiknomia*) was given to Paul. (v. 2). It is claimed that this was a special stewardship that was committed to Paul exclusively, or at least was revealed to him first. It is a mere assumption, however, to say that this had never been revealed before. Paul says in verse 5 that this same thing had been revealed to the other apostles and prophets.

2. The *mystery* was made known to Paul. (v. 3). Again it is assumed that this mystery remained hidden until it was revealed to Paul; however, this the passage does not so state. To say that God revealed a thing to Paul is not to say that he revealed it first or exclusively to Paul. Dispensationalists make a serious error in logic, and consequently in their exegesis, at this point.

3. The mystery "in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets." (v. 5). This is taken to mean that no reference to the mystery was made in prophecy; because, it is said, if the Old Testament prophets foretold the great mystery, then it was made known in the sense that Paul says it had not been made known. Peter plainly states, however, that the prophets "prophesied of the grace that should come unto you" and that they "testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ."¹¹ Obviously, this is grace on the basis of Christ's sufferings (or the shedding of his blood). The prophets, according to Peter, foretold it! And Peter and others (before Paul) preached this redemption on the basis of "the precious blood of Christ, as a lamb without blemish and without spot."¹² Still, Stam declares that "in

⁷Thayer, *op. cit.*, p. 420.

⁸Ephesians 3:6.

⁹Cornelius R. Stam, *The Fundamentals of Dispensationalism*, p. 55.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 79.

¹¹I Peter 1:10-12.

¹²I Peter 1:19.

prophecy salvation by grace through faith *alone* is not contemplated,"¹³ and that "*never were the merits of Christ's death proclaimed as the ground of Salvation until Paul.*"¹⁴

Peter's implication, in the passages cited above, plainly is that what the prophets had prophesied about was now being more fully made known. It had been referred to by the prophets, but it had not been made known as it was now being made known. This also is the meaning of Ephesians 3:5.

4. Paul says that "unto me . . . is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ." (v. 8). Here again it is assumed that this grace was given to Paul exclusively; but the verse does not state this. What had been committed to the Twelve was now given to Paul that he might go especially to the Gentiles with it.

5. The word *unsearchable* (*anexichniastros*) is said to mean that the gospel had never been mentioned in prophecy. O'Hair affirms: "The word '*unsearchable*' means '*untraceable*'; this is, '*unprophesied*'."¹⁵

Thayer defines *anexichniastros* this way: "*that cannot be traced out, that cannot be comprehended, . . .*"¹⁶ The riches of Christ, even after God has told man about them in the gospel, are still to an extent unsearchable; man is not fully capable of tracing them out, or understanding them. And certainly he did not trace them out in the sense of discovering them for himself. The reference is to man's comprehension, not to what the prophets had said, or had not said, about these matters.

6. Paul speaks of the "mystery, which from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God." (v. 9). Dispensationalists take this to mean that it was completely hidden until it was revealed to Paul. This, however, is a strained and unnecessary construction of Paul's language. Before the mystery was revealed to the holy apostles and prophets (as stated in verse 5), not before it was made known to Paul, it was hidden in the mind of God.

Miscellaneous arguments. There are at least three positions held by Dispensationalists on the commission of Matthew 28: (1) Bullinger taught that this commission is for a future age.¹⁷ (2) Stam and others hold that it was the commission for the Twelve in the early Acts period, but not for the present dispensation of grace.¹⁸ (3) Scofield claimed that this commission is for the present age, since this age began at Pentecost.¹⁹

Stam's claim makes the message of this commission a promise of an earthly kingdom, not the offer of grace on the basis of Christ's

¹³Stam, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 74.

¹⁵J. C. O'Hair, *The Unsearchable Riches of Christ*, p. 113.

¹⁶Thayer, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

¹⁷Bullinger, *op. cit.*, pp. 131, 132.

¹⁸Stam, *op. cit.*, pp. 175-189.

¹⁹Scofield, *op. cit.*, p. 1044.

death. He says of it: "This new commission was in fact no departure from the prophetic program; it was a *further development* of it."²⁰ Again he says: "To assume that our Lord now sends these apostles to proclaim '*the gospel of the grace of God*' is wholly unwarranted."²¹

According to Luke 24:46, 47 it was necessary for "Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day" so that "repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem." This is the gospel of remission of sins on the basis of Christ's death; and Stam agrees that this commission, along with the records in Matthew 28:19, 20 and Mark 16:15, 16, is the one proclaimed by the Twelve.²² So when the Twelve, in the early part of Acts, were working under the commission recorded in the gospels, they were proclaiming salvation on the merits of Christ's death.

It is argued, too, that Peter, in Acts 3:19, 20, promised the Jews that God would send Christ back to earth immediately and set up the earthly kingdom, on the condition of their national repentance. There is some contingent relationship expressed in Acts 3:19, 20 between repentance and conversion on the one hand and the coming of Christ on the other. Whatever this relationship may be, there are two things that the passage does not state. It does not say that Christ would have returned immediately if they had repented, nor does it state that he would have come to establish an earthly kingdom. These two ideas are read into the passage.

In Galatians 2:7 Paul says that "the gospel of the uncircumcision was committed unto me, as the *gospel* of the circumcision *was* to Peter." It is assumed that two different gospels are mentioned here, but such an idea is not demanded by the language. One gospel may be under consideration, with two spheres of labor in view for proclaiming the one gospel. The facts demand this idea; for obviously the leaders in Jerusalem gave Paul the right hand of fellowship because they recognized that there was no basic difference between his gospel and theirs.

Ultra Dispensationalists insist that if the Twelve preached the gospel for this age, then the miraculous signs of Mark 16:16-20 must be a part of that gospel now. The mistake here is in assuming that the signs must continue as long as the belief and baptism. Mark 16:16-20 does not itself teach that the signs would be temporary, but it allows for such if it is taught elsewhere in the New Testament. Paul taught in I Corinthians 13:8-10 that miraculous signs would end.

III. Water Baptism and Paul's Gospel

Ultra Dispensationalists teach that water baptism was a part of the "kingdom gospel" of the early Acts period, but it ended when the present dispensation of grace began with Paul's ministry. O'-

²⁰Stam, *op. cit.*, p. 181.

²¹*Ibid.*

²²*Ibid.*, pp. 175, 176.

Hair puts it this way: "Members of Christ's body today are united to the Head in the heavenlies, baptized with His baptism and are complete in Him, and have nothing to do with water baptism."²³

Dispensational interpretations. Dispensationalists deny that water baptism is mentioned in Galatians 3:27; Romans 6:3, 4; Ephesians 4:5; and Colossians 2:12. A distinction is made between "real baptism" (Spirit baptism) and "ritual baptism" (water baptism). Spirit baptism, it is said, is the baptism in these passages; for to allow reference to water baptism is to make water baptism essential, and that just cannot be true!

The idea of Spirit baptism, as the Dispensationalists speak of it, is unusual. Chafer says that *baptidzo* has a "secondary meaning" of being "joined closely to that which exercises a determining influence."²⁴ Baker states that "the word BAPTISM has a basic meaning to *become identified with*."²⁵ Chafer speaks again of the "Spirit's ministry of uniting the believer to Christ," and says that this is the baptism into Christ.²⁶ To be baptized by the Spirit, according to this, is to be brought by the Spirit into close union with Christ.

There are serious objections to these interpretations. The term "ritual baptism" is prejudicial. Water baptism is not "ritual" in the sense of the meritorious factor. Furthermore, it is begging the question to eliminate water baptism from these passages merely because to allow it is to make water baptism necessary.

The results are confused with the element in their idea of Spirit Baptism. They make the Spirit the agent, and Christ the element in which the believer is baptized. Even if Spirit baptism did put one into Christ, the Spirit would be the element, and being put into Christ would be the result. John said: "I indeed baptize you in water unto repentance."²⁷ Water was the element in which they were baptized; the result, a life of repentance. Likewise, in being baptized into Christ, one is baptized in water (the element), and being in Christ is the end reached. Being in Christ is not the baptism. It would be interesting to have Chafer's and Baker's authority for their definitions of *baptidzo*. Thayer, Abbott-Smith, and Liddell and Scott do not give such a definition.

Much is made of the fact that Paul does not command baptism in the epistles. This is taken to mean that water baptism had ended. The epistles were written to Christians, so the natural thing would be for Paul to speak of what baptism had done for them, instead of commanding it.

The one baptism of Ephesians 4:5. This is water baptism. The baptism of Matthew 28:19, 20 is to be administered by man, and it is therefore water baptism. Man does not administer Spirit baptism.

²³O'Hair, *op. cit.*, p. 229.

²⁴Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, III, 73.

²⁵Charles F. Baker, *Real Baptism*, p. 64.

²⁶Chafer, *loc. cit.*

²⁷Matthew 3:11.

This commission was given in Galilee. The gospel that began in Galilee was preached by Peter to Cornelius, according to Acts 10:37. And this was the gospel by which a people are called from among the Gentiles, according to Acts 15:14, which is admittedly the work of Paul's gospel in this age. So the gospel that Peter preached to Cornelius is the gospel of Matthew 28:19, 20, and it is the gospel for this age. That gospel requires water baptism, so water baptism must be the one baptism of Ephesians 4:5.

IV. Objections to Dispensational Views of the Mystery

Prophecies applied to the church. The prophecies of the Old Testament do not leap over the present age of grace. A detailed exegesis cannot be given here, but prophecies are applied to the present age in Acts 13:32-37; 15:15, 16; 26:22, 23; Hebrews 8:8-12; and many other passages.

The Twelve preached the gospel of grace. It has already been shown that the commission of Matthew 28:19, 20, under which the apostles labored, is the gospel of grace for this age. In I Peter 1:18, 19 Peter says that he preached that men are now redeemed "with the precious blood of Christ." The gospel in Hebrews, according to Hebrews 2:3, was "confirmed unto us by them that heard him" (by the Twelve). This gospel offers redemption on the basis of Christ's blood.

Paul preached the same gospel that the Twelve preached. In Galatians 1:23 Paul says that after his conversion he preached "the faith which once he destroyed," but he had previously destroyed the gospel preached by the Twelve. Again, Paul continued to preach this same gospel until he was before Agrippa in Acts 26:22. For this preaching he was imprisoned but in Ephesians 6:20 he says that for the Mystery gospel he was "an ambassador in bonds." Paul had always taught the same gospel set forth in Ephesians, and this was the gospel that he once opposed (the gospel of the Twelve).

The Joint-Body Church which Paul preached began at Pentecost. According to Ephesians 1:20, 23, Christ was made head of the church, the body, when God "set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places." This Church, begun when God set Christ at his right hand, is the same as the Joint-Body of Ephesians 2:15, 16 (the so-called Mystery Church).

In Acts 28:30, 31, after Paul went to Rome, he was "preaching the Kingdom of God." It is agreed that he was not offering an earthly kingdom. If Paul preached the kingdom, but not an earthly kingdom, why conclude that the Twelve were preaching an earthly kingdom when they preached the kingdom of God.

Misunderstanding of Holy Spirit baptism. It has already been seen that Dispensationalists do not think of Holy Spirit baptism as an overwhelming in the Spirit as the element. What they call Holy Spirit baptism is not Holy Spirit baptism at all. Holy Spirit baptism in the New Testament was an experience of being overwhelmed by (or in) the Spirit, and being influenced thereby in a miraculous

way. (See Acts 2 and Acts 10.) If Holy Spirit baptism is the one baptism for this age, then the Holiness cults are right in their claims of being able to perform miraculous signs. The Dispensationalists, however, think these people are wrong about such miracles.

V. Conclusions

Our conclusions are: (1) the Church was not unknown to the prophetic message; (2) applying prophecy to the Church was the method of interpretation used by the apostles; (3) the Twelve preached the gospel of grace before Paul did; (4) Paul preached the same gospel that the Twelve preached, and water baptism is a part of it; (5) the present dispensation of grace began at Pentecost, not with Paul.

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